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ABSTRACT

An English for Special Purposes (ESP) program, devised for students of the School of Environmental Design at the English Language Centre of King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah, is described. The course is intended to be of direct relevance to students by developing their English language skills and giving them a basic professional vocabulary. A topic and task approach was devised in order to unite the three demands of an ESP program, namely linguistic, conceptual, and methodological needs. Six principles of the topic and task approach are outlined as follows: (1) the content, derived from the discipline, must be relevant to the learner's purpose; (2) one learns by doing; (3) the language is perceived by the learners as a necessary means to a desired end; (4) error is tolerated and even encouraged; (5) there is a focus upon language as the need arises; and (6) attention is paid to the learner's expectations, previous knowledge, and learning styles. It is indicated that the principles are made operational through the topic and task approach, which lays equal stress upon content and methodology. The actual program is described with regard to its structure, and the way topic and task are integrated in projects. The problems of generalizability, specific or general content and methodology, teacher competence, and evaluation are discussed. (AMH)

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COMMUNICATIVE SYLLABUS DESIGN - THE TOPIC AND TASK APPROACH

Revised version of a paper given at the BAAL Annual Meeting, Sussex University, September 19, 1981.

MICHAEL J. REYNOLDS

This paper will describe an EAP programme devised for students of the School of Environmental Design at the English Language Centre of King Abdul Aziz University, Jeddah and will state the principles that underlay that programme. I hope to be able to show that those principles - those of the 'topic and task' approach - are valid not only as they were devised for that programme but have a wider validity in EAP programme design and teaching in general. I shall hereafter refer to the programme by its initials as the ELC/SED programme.

The programme began, in 1977, as a result of the SED's dissatisfaction with the standard of English reached by their students, who had been following an EAP programme oriented towards the needs of Engineering students in common with all other zeroth year students of the College of Engineering (of which School is a constituent part). The School wanted its own language programme specific to SED needs and purposes. The opportunity was there to negotiate from the outset the nature and shape of an Academic Purposes programme. The programme aims that resulted from the joint Language Centre and SED negotiations were expressed as follows:

> "to provide an English course of direct relevance to SED students which helps develop their English skills at the same time as giving them a basic professional vocabulary orientated towards the subsequent SED programme. The course attempts to cover basic concepts in the fields of planning, architecture and landscape architecture within the broad framework of man and the environment."

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From this brief the 'topic and task' approach was developed. It can be seen that the programme addresses itself to two areas of responsibility and activity: linguistic and conceptual. To these must be added a third-metholological, as defined and practised in the parent discipline.

Embedded here are elements of three, potentially very different, types of course: a language course, a subject course and a study skills course. The 'topic and task' approach is an attempt to unite these three legitimate demands upon an EAP programme in such a way that each is met equally and appropriately. I am indebted on this point, and a number of others to a colleague in Jeddah, Martin Phillips, and a paper he wrote there, Study skills training and the notion of task; to which I shall refer again later.

I propose now to state the principles of the 'topic and task' approach. There are six. They overlap to some extent with the principles of communicative language teaching stated by Morrow (1981), but I shall try to mark the differences of emphasis or substance, differences deriving from the specific nature of the learning situations for which this approach is advocated.

1. *that the content must be relevant to the learner's purpose. And what is the content? It is not primarily linguistic, in the sense of being statable in the form of a syntactic, notional or functional listing. The content is derived from the discipline as interpreted by the parent faculty and takes the form of that selection of topics considered by the faculty as basic entry-points of access to the discipline. An example from the ELC/SED programme is the topic ecosystem which is embodied on the programme in a unit of work entitled the Desert Ecosystem. Relevance of content (topics) and of operations upon content (tasks) is a two-way attribute - it needs to*

be perceived both by the learners (who have chosen to become students of a particular discipline) and by the sponsor of the language-learning (the parent faculty, who will be setting the communicative demands in the subject subsequent to any language programme).

2. *that <u>you learn by doing</u>. The language learning endeavour, for academic purposes, is best facilitated by being set in its broader educational context. What you do then on the language programme is, essentially, the subject. This idea of the importance of the wider context seems to be gaining assent. It is advocated by Widdowson (1979) with his notion of 'simple accounts' drawn from subject teachers' methodologies. It is put forward by Brumfit (1979) when he says:*

> *"the view of language learning as a purely technical operation, with no broader educational overtones, needs to be treated with suspicion."*

3. *that <u>the language is perceived by the learners as a necessary means to a desired end</u>. The desired end is the ability to gain access to the <u>subject</u> knowledge and the <u>subject</u> study-skill. Communication, therefore, is a necessary but not sufficient goal in itself. What the learners really see themselves as wanting is the <u>content</u> in the form of the discipline's knowledge and methodology. The position might be more accurately stated by saying that communicative language teaching has an <u>enabling</u> end: the development of the competence (the means) to pursue the real end, namely subject-knowledge and subject skill.*

4. *that error is tolerated (Morrow) even encouraged. The demand and the effort to communicate, always provided that one wants to communicate about the particular topic of discourse, produce communication needs and reveal communication lacks: In this process errors and mistakes are made. Learning most surely takes place at those meeting-points in time of need, want and lack, provided that adequate feedback is given and received. Therefore errors generated by the communicative process inform and guide both learner and teacher and facilitate the learning of communication. This point has been well made by Pit Corder (1967) and others working in interlanguage studies.*

5. *following from 4 there is a focus upon language as the need arises in the communicative process. This principle is similar to Brumfit's methodological recommendation that you 'communicate as far as possible with all available recourses' but also 'drill if necessary'. (Brumfit (1979)) when communication breakdown has occurred and when the cause (albeit only partially and probably rather than certainly) of the breakdown has been identified.*

This principle raises the difficult question of the extent to which communicative difficulty can be predicted 'a priori' at all and thus to what extent, and where in the curriculum process, it can and should be specified. To what extent is such prediction a strategic decision for the syllabus designer, to be incorporated in the syllabus or stated in a set of tactical guidelines for teachers, to what extent a matter to be left to the tactical sense and skill of the teacher involved in the teaching/learning process?

In principle this question is best resolved not in terms of overt language manipulation but through the manipulation of the variables of task-complexity (see below). In practice, however, and because topic and task methodology was in its infancy in Jeddah - language focussing was made overt in the teaching/learning process in the form of a specific 'language component' within each unit of work.

6. *that attention is paid to the learners' expectations, previous knowledge and learning styles and strategies. This principle applies, of course, to all good teaching and it is not being claimed as in any sense exclusively distinguishing the topic and task approach. What is worth emphasising, and is therefore the reason for stating this principle, is that the learner on a communicative language learning programme is likely to adopt a variable focus, under the pressure of the tasks being undertaken, his expectations of any language programme and previous knowledge both of the subject matter and of language learning and teaching. The learner will focus now on subject-matter, now on language, now on communicative interaction. One of the Hallidayan macro-functions is likely to be the primary focus of concern of the learner at any one time in the communicative process. This being so, it behoves the language programme to adopt variable focus as a principle of operation, and give equal weight to the content and the process of communication.*

An examination of these principles will show that the topic and task approach lays equal stress upon content, as subject-matter and skill and not as a strictly linguistic construct and methodology derived from the parent discipline and knowledge of communication processes.

These principles are made optional through the TOPICS and TASKS of the programme. Let me define these terms.

TOPIC

Two senses must be distinguished here:

(1) the TOPIC OF DISCOURSE which can exist prior to and independently of discourse itself - though, of course, it is only realized in and through discourse. In this sense, TOPIC = concept, within a conceptual field. And in this sense TOPICS are specifiable in a syllabus, and typically appear as the titles of units of work on a programme. e.g. ELC/SED: The biosphere; Landforms; Types of building; Urban Transportation.

(2) TOPICS within discourse structure, generated by the discourse itself.

These two senses are expressed in Ervin-Tripp's (1964) statement:

> "Topic includes both gross categories such as subject-matter (economics, household affairs, gossip) and the propositional content of utterances."

TOPIC in sense 2 has been examined as a notion by several people, notably Keenan & Schieffelin (1979), Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974), Maynard (1980). The contexts of topic-investigation, have, however, been conversational, and between native-speakers, rather than pedagogic and in an L_2 setting - with the notable exception of Allwright (1977): Topics, Turns and Tasks. Allwright's analysis is of a traditional language class, where the teacher's overt aim was to develop vocabulary. He distinguishes 4 categories of topic:

M = models (samples of the target language)

I = information about the language

P = communication concerned with pedagogical & procedural matters.

*0 = "any other use of language or non-verbal communication (e.g. to discuss traffic-problems in the target language for conversation practice".)

It is this last category that is the most interesting and which in the Topic and Task approach is elevated from the rag-bag position to the front of the list.

The relationship between the two senses of TOPIC remains problematic, and raises interesting questions for syllabus/curriculum design. One of which is: what is the relationship of TOPIC to TASK; does TOPIC constrain TASK, and if so, how and to what extent?

To return to the notion of TOPIC it is as 'a gross category such as subject-matter', refined in terms of concepts derived from the discipline and its faculty and thus decided externally to the T/L process that is the starting-point for the syllabus specification of the Topic and Task approach.

TASK

There is, of course, a vast literature on this term, associated in particular with the advocates of Task Analysis and Behavioural Objectives specification of the 60's. A recent paper (1974) by Gagné - 'Task analysis - its relation to content analysis' (Educ. Psych. 11, I) puts the position of Task analysis very clearly.

Three elements of any task are: input-process-output. Gagné refers to these as phases - of STIMULATION - MEDIATION - PERFORMANCE.

Task Analysis works backward from observation of PERF. in order to specify the optimal stimulus conditions. About MEDIATION he and Task Analysis is silent. It is, of course, this central processing phase that is of great interest to applied linguists and language teachers.

A more serious objection to Task Analysis is that its procedures become prescriptive. If we believe, with Halliday and with the ethnomethodologists, that language use is an indexical, meaning-making process then we cannot support an approach that believes that one can arrive at prescribing one route from aim to goal.

Further I find that T.A. has nothing to say about open-ended tasks, ones in which there cannot inherently be a single right answer. Environmental Design is a field in which open-ended tasks are endemic; in which open-endedness indeed has the status of a methodological principle.

For working purposes I find it useful to define TASK as goal-directed activity, involving operations upon data. Following Phillips (quoted earlier) we can then discern a number of variables within task. To his three - a conceptual, a linguistic, and a physical variable - I would add two: a behavioural and a cognitive variable.

conceptual:	*related, clearly, to TOPIC.*
linguistic:	*related to both TOPIC and TASK. Thus, it includes data generated by the TOPIC prior to the operation of the TASK and discourse generated by the task itself. Included are syntactic, semantic and pragmatic parameters.*
physical:	*Phillips refers to this variable as "realizations in substance", oral and written, of a task. I would include factors such as setting, media, inputs and outputs within this variable.*

behavioural: this variable refers to the task-doers and setters. It is the interactional variable and includes factors of learner style and background knowledge.

cognitive: refers to the mental operations required in the performance of a task.

It is the syllabus designer's and the teacher's function to identify and manipulate these inter-related task variables and so adjust them for degree of complexity and difficulty.

A distinction once again is being drawn here: complexity does not necessarily entail difficulty. Complexity is a syllabus designer's construct; difficulty is a learner's perception.

By being aware of the inter-relationship of task-variables, the programme can avoid the dangers of distortion that Phillips refers to:

- *that of becoming a subject programme, through exclusive concentration on the conceptual and cognitive variables*
- *of becoming a traditional study skills course through over-emphasis on the physical variable.*
- *of becoming a traditional language (structural or functional) programme through over-emphasis on the linguistic and physical variables.*

I must now consider questions of sequencing and grading.

Two principles are at work:

1) *that one proceeds from the simple to the more complex.*
2) *that sequencing is cyclical; of knowledge, skill and of language.*

It is not possible to grade TOPICS; no one concept is inherently more complex than another. TOPICS can, however, be graded as to depth of treatment by adjusting the conceptual variable of TASK.

Grading and sequencing, then, is by a process of adjustment of task-variables, for degree of complexity (specifiable in the syllabus) and difficulty (to be judged in the classroom).

Examples of task-variable adjustment are as follows:

- *of the physical variable: by stipulating the length of discourse: both received and produced by the learners.*

- *of the conceptual variable: in terms of the familiarity of the concept or conceptual field to the learners.*

Operating on this variable, it was decided on the ELC/SED programme to place the unit on Types of Building - requiring among other tasks description of the learners' own homes - before the unit on Housing as a planning function (Units 1 and 18 respectively, out of 24).

- *of the cognitive variable: through decisions as to the nature and number of mental operations involved in a task.*

For example, describing the shape of one object is less complex than contrasting the shape of two objects; in turn this is less complex than a task of justifying the choice of one object over another, in order to perform a given function - where factors such as shape, weight, composition, cost, among many others, may well enter: and be 'written in' as task requirements (in the form of instructions).

- *of the linguistic variable: in terms, as mentioned before, of the depth of treatment of concepts; that is, in terms of Widdowson's simple accounts' but not simplications.*

  To doctor text would be to destroy its authenticity, and therefore to deny the possibility of authentic responses from the learners. They would be less than satisfied at the over-emphasis on the linguistic variable to the detriment of the conceptual variable. The principle of relevance would be sinned against.

In fact, and underlying the whole approach to grading is the position that to a very large extent, the linguistic (textual) variable is self-adjusting as a function of the adjustment of the other variables of task: that is, again,

insofar as the linguistic variable can be controlled and captured in a syllabus-specification. As Breen & Candlin (1980) point out, sequencing

> *"derives from the state of the learners rather than from the implicit 'logic' of the content itself".*

ELC/SED Programme : operational organization

It is time to return to the ELC/SED programme and describe how the principles were put into operation.

Programme structure

The programme was divided into 24 units, each representing a treatment of a conceptual field (TOPICs - 'main' and 'aspects'). The collection of TOPICS represent the enabling objective of the programme: the acquisition of knowledge and skill in and through communicating about Man and the Environment (cf. recall the original ELC/SED brief).

This theme was divided in the negotiations into three scales of conceptual focus: the Micro-, Meso- and Macro-environment scales.

The boundaries of these scales are definable as follows:

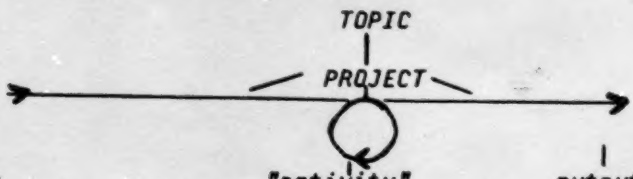
- *Micro: the building, and its immediate environment (garden, street)*
- *Meso: rising in scale, from the concept of the neighbourhood to that of the city.*
- *Macro: defined, by the Chairman of the Department of Landscape Architecture, as 'the globe', the only scale that defines itself non-arbitrarily. The subject-matter of this scale could be most easily summarized as ecology.*

For reasons of conceptual familiarity to the learners it was decided to present the Micro-scale first; then the Macro; finally the Meso, as being in the eyes of SED the synthesis that arises out of the Micro and the Macro.

Each scale is cyclical, and there is conceptual and consequently linguistic recycling between the scales.

The programme is next sub-divided, within scales into units and projects. These are at a macro-level the TOPIC and TASK.

Further sub-division is best illustrated as follows:



I				(macro-task)
II	inputs	"activity"	outputs	(tasks)
	-readings	-fieldwork	-report	
	-lectures	-date collection	-caption writing	(component,
	-note-taking	-date examination	-visual display &	or
	-discussion	-collation	-annotation	sub-tasks)
	-film	-discussion	-discussion	
			-Jury presentation*	

(*Jury presentation = oral presentation and defence of verbal/visual project work: a standard School of Architecture technique).

The project acts as the unifying focus and superordinate (macro-) task within each unit of work. It is an integrating frame for the three phases at level II of inputs, 'activity' and outputs. Each of the projects on the ELC/SED programme is oriented to the local environment, in accordance with principles 1 and 6. The learners work with unfamiliar concepts and tasks but in a known context. In this way there is a gain in the accessibility of information and in both topic and task relevance for the learners. An example from the programme

is Unit 12 on Landforms (about halfway through the programme). I will quote from the Teacher's Notes just the parts referring to the topic and the macro-task (project).

Topic: LANDFORMS

Weathering/Erosion/Deposition and their agents; Slope; Rock types; Geophysical processes.

Task: Project - to investigate landforms and landform processes through the medium of lectures, reading and fieldwork in the Jeddah locality; to write a report summarizing the factual information from lectures and readings: to report in writing on fieldwork.

(Fieldwork tasks) Observing and recording-verbally and visually-phenomena in a local wadi, following a prepared instruction sheet and after viewing a video film on fieldwork procedures. Discussing informally with tutor points of interest and difficulty while in the field. Taking notes from tutor in the field.

(Project writing tasks) (a) Synthesis of information from lectures and readings into a short essay (three sections) illustrated with simple diagrams (referred to in the text).

(b) Fieldwork report in sections on landforms observed with explanations for their formation, illustrated with diagrams.

Problems

Among the many I will restrict myself to mentioning four.

1. the problem of generalizability: of inducing competence from successful performance. Morrow (1979) discusses the problem succinctly, referring to it as the problem of extrapolation:

> "If one assesses a candidate's performance in terms of a particular task, what does one learn of his ability to perform other tasks?"

- or indeed to perform a similar task later with the same or greater degree of success? I believe that possible solutions to this problem are to be found in (1) an emphasis on formative rather than summative evaluation

(Breen & Candlin, 1980), (2) the use of cyclical sequencing, (3) the keeping of diaries of process difficulty and solution by the learners and the teacher and (4) the use of "branching" programme self-access materials available as necessary and desired.

2. the specific v. general conflict

How specific should content and methodology be? Is it not both more accurate, commonsensical and economical to see academic skills as discipline-free for all practical purposes, or at least generalizable across large clusters, such as Arts, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences? I think we may be setting up an unnecessary dilemma here. Methodologically, if the skills developed through task performances are in fact generalizable across disciplines then that is a welcome gain. It is not a necessary condition of task-selection. The necessary constraints upon task-selection are in the last analysis only two: that they be relevant (principle 1) and achievable (a matter of task manipulation, in both syllabus specification and in classroom practice).

3. teacher competence

To what extent is it feasible or fair to expect subject-competence in the language-teacher? This question is contentious and can appear threatening. In practice, in Jeddah at least, it did not seem at all insuperable. There are two aspects to the solution: via the recruitment policy of teachers, whereby a mixture of language specialist teachers and language teachers who have training in non-linguistic academic disciplines work together. The former can and do master the rudiments of the discipline they are 'servicing'. The second aspect is collaboration with the parent faculty. This is not always forthcoming, for various reasons - but the ultimate success of the programme is undoubtedly a function of the success of the collaboration between language centre and

faculty. I hope I was not unusually lucky in my experience with SED in Jeddah.

4. the problem of evaluation

What in fact in the Topic and Task approach is being evaluated? Is it

subject-knowledge?

subject-skill? (e.g. visual display in SED)

cognitive-ability?

communicative competence? (or performance?)

Clearly all four, though the second least of all. The problem becomes acute when, as occasionally happens one is confronted with a student who is communicatively competent, by all known measures, but is unable to grasp certain concepts or perform certain cognitive operations important within the discipline.

What in short are the rights and responsibilities of those evaluating? I cannot as yet offer a solution to this problem, except to reiterate the importance of collaboration with faculty. Some joint assessment was being carried out at the end of semesters by the time I left Jeddah.

Progress = Future Work

The Topic and Task approach is, as yet, a rough and ready instrument, though I hope that its principles are sufficiently clearly established, and thus its validity as an approach in the general EAP endeavour. I would like to end therefore by suggesting three areas in which further work needs to be undertaken in order to strengthen its operation and properly test out its theoretical validity.

(1) *in the identification, adjustment and sequencing of TASK variables sketched out earlier, and of TOPICS using centrality within the discipline as a criterion. Five variables are clearly inadequate but many more could easily become unmanageable for planning and teaching.*

(2) *on the more strictly linguistic dimension, much work still needs to be done on the identification within tasks of discourse units and in particular on the discoursal relationship between topics and tasks. Are they, for instance, co-terminous? Is the pedagogical treatment of topics typically task-centred in a pre-planned way as opposed to looser structures to be found in other activity types (Levinson 1979).*

(3) *more generally, a great deal of work is necessary on the description of the information structures of different disciplines, very broadly in terms of the content schemata available within a discipline and their realizations as episodic structures. The work of people like Chafe (1977) and Schank & Abelson (1977) into these areas needs to be extended.*

In summary I am suggesting that traditional boundaries between EAP language programmes and subject programmes in L_2 (English) medium need to be questioned and that a closer identity between the two sorts of programme exists than is commonly thought. In order to establish the validity of this claim and in order to base soundly communicative language development programmes of the topic and task type a lot more investigation is needed into the communicative demands, seen as a conceptual and cognitive nexus, that specific subjects make upon the learners of that subject.

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